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**The Effect That Municipal Ordinances Have On Alarm Calls**

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**An Administrative Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Required for Graduation from the  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The effect that municipal ordinances have on alarm calls is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because false alarms are a drain on police resources. While responding to false alarm calls, officers are unable to deal with real crime and traffic issues within the community. If false alarm calls were reduced, manpower could be allocated to other missions within the agency.

The purpose of this research is to determine the benefits of enacting municipal ordinances that control alarm operations. It examines whether holding individuals responsible for the proper maintenance and operation of their alarm systems brings the number of false alarm calls down.

The method of inquiry used by the researcher included a review of municipal internet sites, periodicals, and journals. A study of alarm calls in Harker Heights, Texas before and after the passage of a alarm control ordinance was conducted.

The researcher discovered that when municipalities enact alarm control ordinances, the incident of false alarm calls for service decreases dramatically. This results in more time for police patrol officers to address other crime issues within their community.

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## INTRODUCTION

False alarm calls have become a significant issue for many police and sheriff's departments. The number of these types of calls has increased dramatically in recent years. False alarm calls are a drain on resources because most departments require two units to respond to each alarm call. They can also become a significant threat to officer safety. Officers handle so many false alarm calls that they can become complacent, expecting each call to be benign with no suspects present at the scene. Officers are also at a higher risk of injury in a motor vehicle accident because false alarm calls require officers to respond quickly in an attempt to apprehend any persons breaking into the residence or business.

The purpose of this research is to determine the answer to: Do ordinances regulating alarm systems have a beneficial impact on the number of false alarm incidents? Municipal ordinances can hold the alarm manufacturers, installers, monitoring organizations, and, ultimately, the homeowner/business owner accountable for their malfunctioning alarm systems and the resulting drain on police services. Ordinances can also provide incentive for the alarm industry to maintain and upgrade their equipment that is prone to cause false alarms.

The sources and methods of inquiry for this research project will predominately be a statistical study of alarm calls for service and the associated costs before and after passage of an alarm control ordinance in Harker Heights, Texas. Enforcement records and court records related to the ordinance in Harker Heights will also be studied, along with information about the experiences of other municipalities who have passed similar

ordinances. A review of security trade journals will be conducted to study the alarm industries response to these municipal ordinances.

The intended outcome of this research paper will be to present the effectiveness of municipal ordinances regulating alarm systems and how false alarm calls for service are affected. This, in turn, will show that ordinances regulating false alarm calls can significantly decrease the amount of false alarm calls. This can benefit any department because it would free officers to respond to other calls for services and increase efficiency of the police department. Alarm ordinances also place the cost of repeated false alarm responses back to those responsible for the calls and not the citizens of the community as a whole.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The information available in print evaluating the problem with false alarms is somewhat limited. However, the World Wide Web has a vast amount of both articles and hard data examining the problem. The April 2004 issue of the *Lone Star Transmitter*, the official trade journal of the Texas Burglar and Fire Alarm Association featured an article by Bill Parsley titled, "Make Active Dialog with Police a Top Concern." In his article, Parsley (2004) addressed alarm manufacturers and installers. He pointed out the severe false alarm problem his industry faces and fairly chastised the industry, as a whole, for failing to communicate with police and sheriff's departments and attempting to help solve the false alarm problems. Parsley (2004) warned that unless the alarm industry starts addressing problem accounts and educating customers about false alarms, the police and sheriff's departments will handle it for them by initiating

sanctions ranging from refusal to respond to levying hefty fines when more than the allotted alarms are dispatched for a location.

A thesis by Cecil F. Rush (1984), titled "A Study of the Need for an Alarm Ordinance in Beaumont, Texas," provided an in depth look at the false alarm call problem that police are dealing with. Rush examines the cause for false alarms and provides long term data showing a steadily increasing false alarm occurrence in Beaumont, Texas.

A significant amount of information on this topic is available on the internet. The New Orleans Police Department False Alarm Reduction Section has developed an entire online resource for its citizens at <http://www.new-orleans.la.us>. The web pages details the false alarm problems that the department faces and provides information on the calls for service related to alarm calls. The online information stated that "in 1997, the New Orleans Police Department responded to 615,413 calls for service. Of these calls for service, 107,651 were alarm calls which accounted for 17% of the Department's total calls for service. During a study the city determined that only 2% of these alarm calls were actual burglaries or attempted burglaries; 98% were false alarm calls. In the following year, 1998, the New Orleans Police Department responded to 654,059 calls for service. Of these calls for service, 101,689 were alarm calls, which was 16% of the calls for service. Again, 98% of these alarm calls were false." This site offers a rather innovative way to educate consumers on ways to reduce false alarms. Consumers may take a short online educational course on operating their alarms. In exchange for their time, the City of New Orleans will give them a voucher good towards any false alarm

penalty that they incur. The New Orleans Police Department has an ordinance in effect that addresses false alarm calls.

Another agency that has a significant presence on the internet in regards to its false alarm problem is the Charles County Government in La Plata, Maryland. Their site, at <http://www.charlescounty.org>, is expansive and offers online statistics about false alarm calls in their jurisdiction. They go as far as to offer a rating system that gives their citizens an indication which alarm systems and companies have higher false alarm rates. The county lists the most common causes of false alarms and breaks them down by type. Some of the causes given involving homeowners were use of incorrect key pad codes, failure to train other authorized users such as babysitters or relatives children, and failure to secure doors and windows before turning on the alarm. Installers were also found to be responsible for improper application or installation of interior motion detectors, improper application or installation of outdoor beam, and improper charging or checking of batteries. Sometimes false alarms were determined to be caused by faulty equipment such as panels, detectors, and keypads. Charles County has enacted an ordinance regulating false alarms.

An organization called the False Alarm Reduction Association (FARA) provides an enormous library of literature online related to the false alarm problem at FARA online. The False Alarm Reduction Association is an association of persons employed by government and public safety agencies in charge of, or working in, False Alarm Reduction Units. Their stated goal is to assist these individuals in reducing false alarms for their jurisdiction. This site offers an expansive list of informative articles and studies of municipalities that have enacted alarm ordinances. Some of the articles reviewed

provided some very good examples of successful false alarm reductions by ordinance. In 1996, Huntsville, Alabama police had an estimated 5,450 alarm sites within their jurisdiction and were responding to more than 1,300 false alarms per month. A False Alarm Ordinance was passed and in full force by March, 1997. A decrease in false alarm calls rapidly resulted, and in 1994, there were 18,000 alarm sites but only 575 false alarm calls per month.

In 2000, Thomas J. Durnan of the Hempstead, New York police department initiated a study of false alarm calls in his village. His research indicated that in the years 1997, 1998, and 1999, the police department responded to an average of 6,000 calls per year. The village of Hempstead already had an alarm control ordinance in place, but it was not being enforced. The department began enforcing the ordinance and the result was significant. In all following years, the number of false alarm calls decreased. In 2003, the city responded to 3,078 calls, an almost 50% reduction.

Discussion of the false alarm problem and possible solutions is not limited to police and alarm manufacturers alone. At the Realty Times website [www.realtytimes.com](http://www.realtytimes.com), an article was written by Michele Dawson titled "Tips for Reducing False Alarms." In this article, Dawson discusses the fact that 7% of homes and 30% of businesses in the United States have a alarm system in operation. Without the effective management of false alarms, they can become a drain on police response times and manpower. In addition to demonstrating the effectiveness of alarm control ordinances, the article gives consumers tips to reduce alarm calls without law enforcement intervention.



## **METHODOLOGY**

The research question to be examined considers whether or not ordinances regulating alarm systems have a beneficial impact on the number of false alarm incidents responded to by municipal emergency services.

The method of inquiry will include reviews of articles, statistics and general information found in both print and on the World Wide Web.

The instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings regarding the subject of false alarm calls for service will include a statistical research of alarm calls responded to by the Harker Heights Police Department in Harker Heights, Texas both before and after passage of a municipal alarm ordinance in 2000.

## **FINDINGS**

Throughout this research, it has consistently been shown that when municipalities pass alarm control ordinances, their false alarm calls decrease dramatically. Statistics were compiled by the author from the computer aided dispatch system for the Harker Heights, Texas Police Department. The Harker Heights Police Department serves a primarily bedroom community of approximately 24,000 people. The population is mixed demographics, with a majority of the residences unattended during the day. Many of the homes are upper scale, with alarms systems installed and activated. An analysis of alarm calls during the period of January 1, 2000 to December 31, 2000 revealed the following statistics: there were a total of 1,215 alarm calls for service during the year. Of those calls, 1,126 calls were for intrusion, 54 were for fires, 16 were for vehicles, and 19 were robbery/holdup alarms.

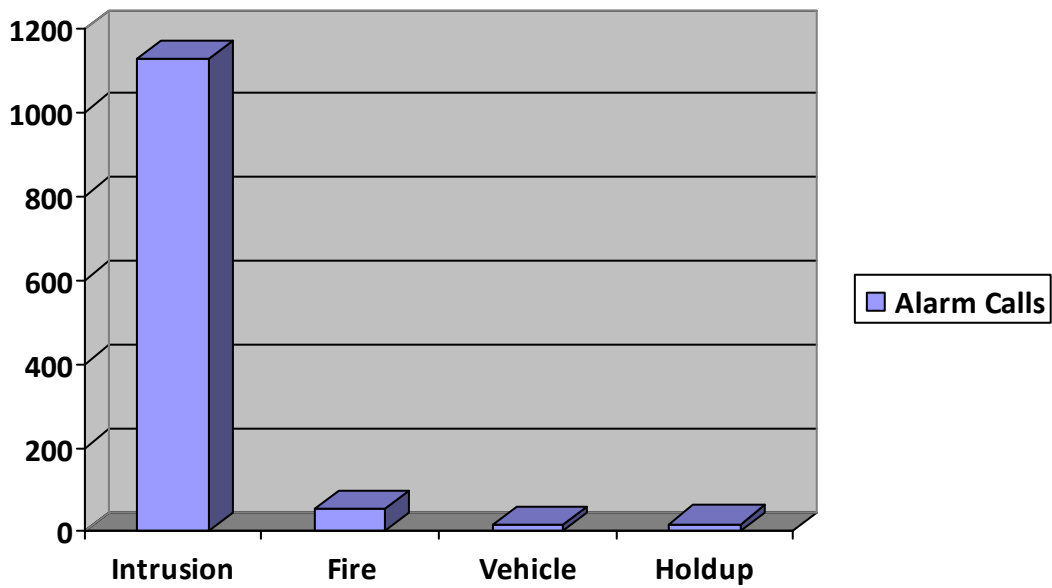


Figure 1. Number of alarm calls by type.

Of the 1,126 calls for service, only one was deemed to be a valid alarm call.

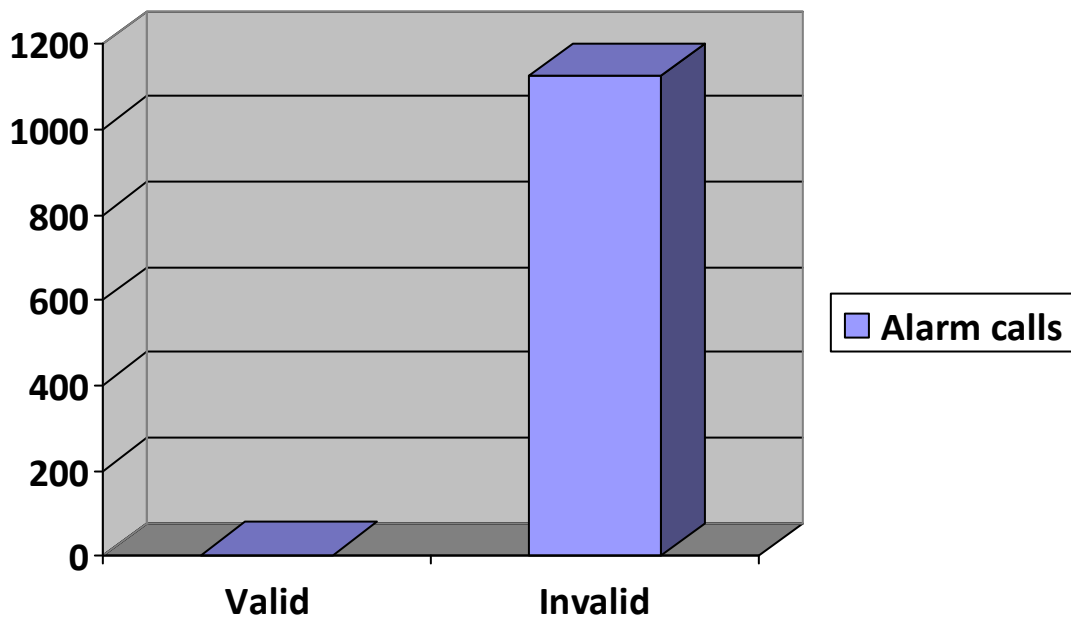


Figure 2. Number of valid vs. invalid calls for service.

Another significant finding when studying the numbers was that the 1,215 calls were associated with only 408 individual addresses. Of these individual addresses, 344 were identified as having five or less responses, and 64 addresses were identified as having more than five responses, with some addresses having as many as 42 responses, during the period.

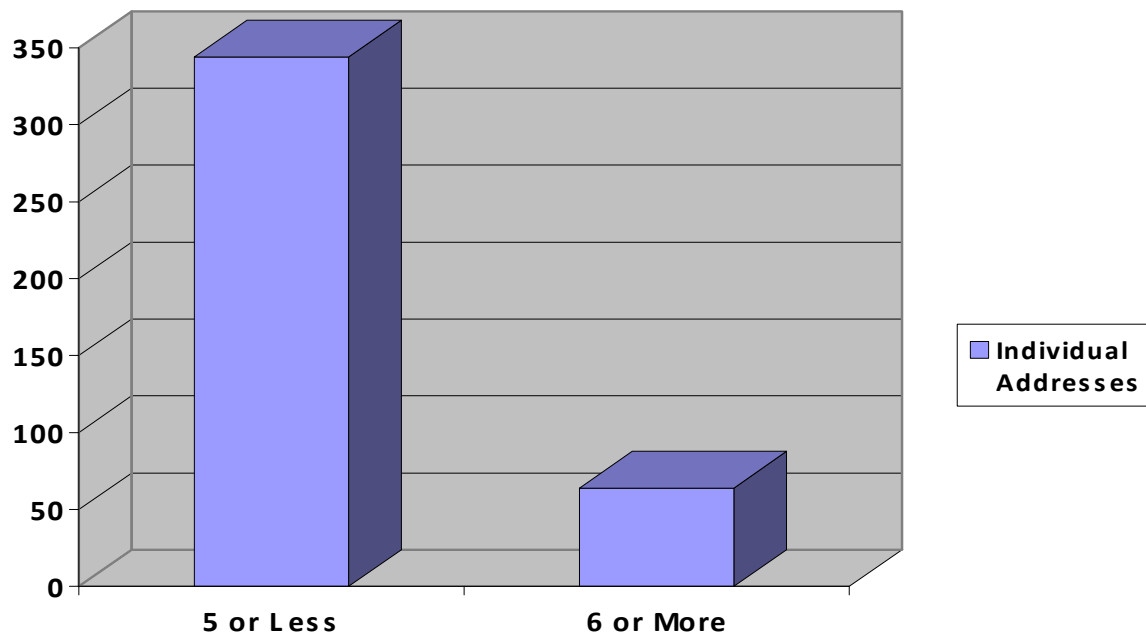


Figure 3. Number of calls to individual addresses

These 64 locations were responsible for 43% of the total alarm call volume.

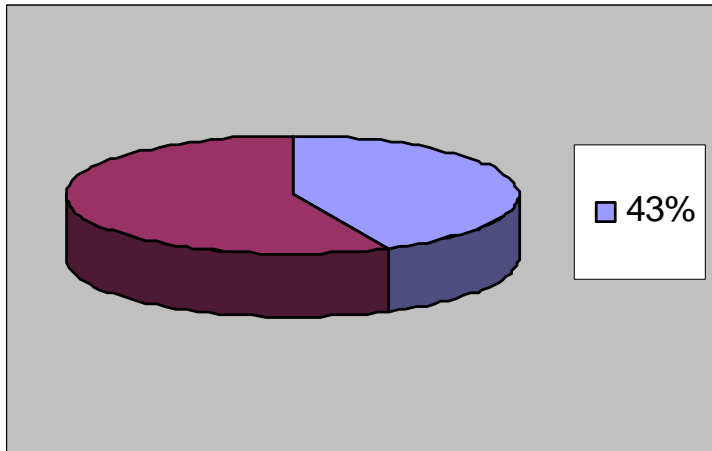


Figure 4. Percentage of high volume addresses

On June 12, 2004, the above statistics were presented to the Harker Heights City Council for consideration. The council drafted and eventually passed an alarm control ordinance. The alarm call statistics were again studied for the period of January 01, 2002 to December 31, 2002.

There were a total of 680 alarm calls for service during the year. The 680 calls were associated with 438 individual addresses. Of these individual addresses, 415 were identified as having five or less responses, and 23 addresses were identified as having more than five responses.

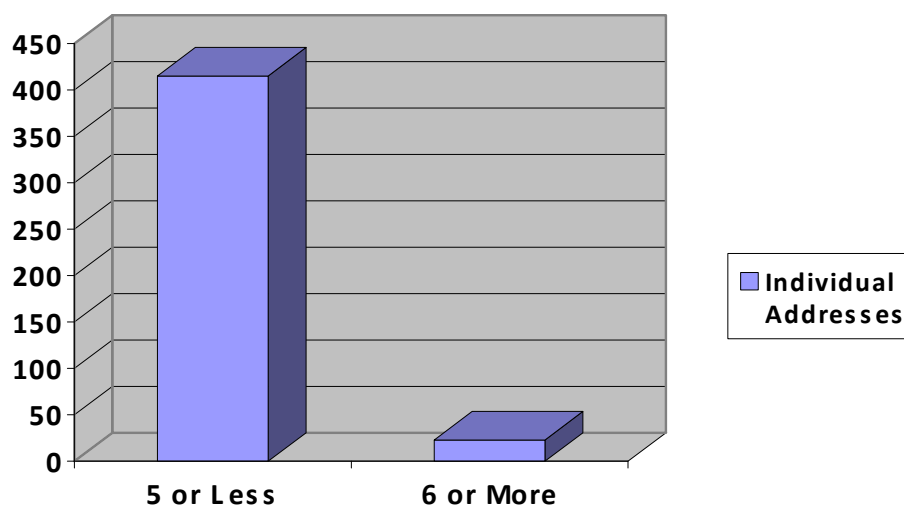


Figure 5. Number of calls by individual addresses

When compared, the statistics indicate that the total number of false alarm calls decreased 44%. The total number of addresses with 6 or more alarm calls decreased 64%.

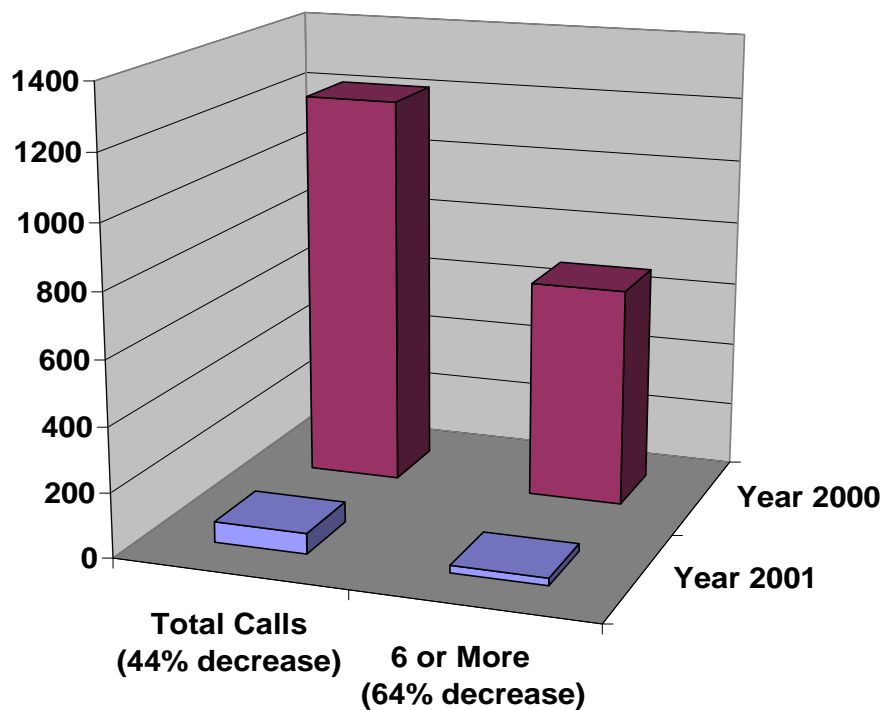


Figure 6. Call reductions by year and address type

## **DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS**

The problem or issue examined by the researcher considered whether or not municipal ordinances addressing the installation and use of alarm systems can reduce the rate of false alarm calls. Police and fire departments are expending valuable resources responding to these calls, and homeowners and business owners are not being held accountable for the problems that the operations of their alarm systems are creating. The purpose of this research was to determine if the implementation of ordinances was a valid and useful tool that municipal governments could use to control the growing amount of alarm calls responded to by police and fire personnel. Do ordinances regulating alarm systems have a beneficial impact on the number of false alarm incidents?

The research question that was examined focused on whether municipalities can enact ordinances that will make homeowners, business owners, and alarm manufacturers responsible for the proper installation, maintenance, and operation of alarm systems. What are the effects of enacting alarm control ordinances? The researcher hypothesized that Municipal ordinances can decrease the number of alarm calls responded to by law enforcement authorities and allow these resources to be reallocated to other missions.

The researcher concluded from the findings that it has consistently been shown that when municipalities pass alarm control ordinances their false alarm calls decrease dramatically. When home and business owners have an interest in insuring that their alarm systems are correctly operated and maintained the number of false alarm incidents decreases. The findings of the research did support the hypothesis.

Limitations that might have hindered this study resulted because of the inability to accurately determine how much of the decrease in false alarm calls was due to equipment improvements. However, the alarm ordinances have motivated the alarm manufacturers, dealers, and installers to improve their product and increase consumer education to reduce false alarms.

This study is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because it demonstrates the effectiveness of municipal alarm control ordinances in reducing false alarm calls. All municipal and county entities without alarm ordinances stand to be effected by the results. Alarm control ordinances can be simplistic in nature or very detailed. Many address only the property owner and his actions, while others regulate alarms from installation thru the eventual operation by the owner thus holding manufacturers accountable as well. There are numerous model alarm ordinances available from both online and professional sources that can be tailored to provide the best fit for a particular situation.

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